

TAXPAYER HELP EXPANDED FOR 1999 FILING SEASON

WASHINGTON -- From new 24-hour telephone service to expanded electronic services, taxpayers can count on more help from the Internal Revenue Service during this year's tax filing season, Internal Revenue Commissioner Charles Rossotti said Monday.

At the 1999 filing season kick-off, Rossotti told a National Press Club news conference that the emphasis on serving taxpayers represents the new direction for the IRS.

"We want to make tax time easier for everyone," Rossotti said. "We're going the extra mile to make our people and our services available around the clock."

For the first time, people with tax questions can reach the toll-free IRS help line 24 hours a day, seven days a week starting this month. Calling 1-800-829-1040 will put them in touch with IRS customer service representatives. Previously, the number operated 16 hours a day, six days a week.

"We'll be here to help, regardless of the time of day or the day of week," Rossotti said. "During this year's filing season, we'll never close."

The expanded telephone service is one of several ways taxpayers can get help filling out their 1998 tax forms. Tax packages began arriving last week in mailboxes.

Taxpayers should watch for several new details on the forms, including:

- **Tax credits.** The 1998 forms include the premiere of the \$400 child tax credit and two higher education tax credits -- the Hope credit and the lifetime learning credit.

"These changes could mean more money in your pocket," Rossotti said.

- **Social Security number.** The IRS has dropped Social Security numbers from the tax package name labels for privacy reasons. This year, people should still use the label, but they must be sure to write in their Social Security numbers on the tax returns to speed processing.

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- **Tax payments.** Taxpayers who owe taxes should make their checks payable to the United States Treasury, not the IRS. To speed processing, checks should no longer be stapled to the tax return.

This year's forms carry a familiar look from previous years, but they also reflect an array of changes from major tax law revisions in 1997 and 1998.

If taxpayers have trouble sorting through the changes or encounter any other problems, they have several places to find help.

Besides the 24-hour telephone number, taxpayers will have expanded opportunities to visit IRS offices during special Saturday help sessions. During this year's filing season, the walk-in service will be offered at 250 locations on 13 Saturdays between Jan. 16 and April 10.

More help is available without leaving home. Whether it's on the Internet or through various toll-free numbers, taxpayers have access to more than 5,000 tax products and services.

The IRS website at www.irs.ustreas.gov carries copies of tax forms and tax tables along with answers to frequently-asked questions and dozens of other major subject areas.

"We're determined to take as much of the headache out of tax time as possible by making it easier to get help," Rossotti said.

The IRS also is taking steps to improve taxpayer service by zeroing in on electronic filing services. More than 25 million taxpayers -- one out of every five -- used various electronic filing options last year, and more are expected to participate this year.

E-filing lets taxpayers get refunds in half the time of paper returns, and it's even faster when taxpayers use the direct deposit option. And it's safe and virtually error-free.

"If you want a refund quickly, the best advice is to file early and file electronically," Rossotti said.

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There are several new electronic programs this year, including two new signature pilots that will make filing completely paper-free for some electronic filers. For the first time, some taxpayers filing electronically can pay their due balances using a credit card.

The changes for this year's filing season reflect the new IRS mission statement to "provide America's taxpayers top quality service by helping them understand and meet their tax responsibilities and by applying the tax law with integrity and fairness to all."

"Our top priority is putting the interests of the taxpayers first, and that's what we intend to do throughout this filing season and throughout the year," Rossotti said.

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